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ABSTRACT

In the conduct of field studies, there are three different points at which data may be collected unobtrusively. The first is when there is a "search" for an area of study. The second point in which data may be gathered unobtrusively is when the researcher is attempting to further the analysis. The third point in which data are collected unobtrusively is during the conduct of the research project. As the public use of these data becomes probable the ethical considerations increase. This report is an attempt to show how the unobtrusive collection of data becomes problematic due to increasing ethical considerations. It also specifies means by which to maintain ethical standards in ambiguous circumstances and settings. (Author/PN)

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IS UNOBTRUSIVE ETHICAL?

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Is Unobtrusive Ethical?

In the conduct of field studies, there are three different points at which data may be collected unobtrusively. The ethical considerations increase as the public use of these data becomes probable. This report is an attempt to show how the unobtrusive collection of data becomes problematic due to increasing ethical considerations. It also specifies means by which to maintain ethical standards in ambiguous circumstances and settings.

Conceiving Research Studies

Researchers are continually seeking new areas of investigation and new ways of explaining events. It is during this "search" period that they "eavesdrop, overhear, pick up or discover" data in an unplanned, unsystematic fashion which later becomes core material for a study. For example, in determining that school careers had not been studied very extensively, this researcher on several occasions had access to data which originated, nurtured and finally, led to a major study. After "overhearing" candidates discuss their experiences as they applied for various educational administration positions, after serving in a number of screening committees, and finally, after numerous conversations with educational administrators, this researcher sought to determine how school careers in administration are established. Therefore, even though entry into the field, approval for access of information and other methodological considerations did not arise, in the conduct of this research, the origin was in the unobtrusive collection of data.

The ethical aspect to consider is that because the data collection process

at this time is informal, access to it is not formally solicited, nor is it granted. The informality of the collection of these data increases the value, validity and naturlaness, but it jeopardizes the relationships with the subjects due to the ethical practices. The ethical issue seems to be that those who have provided data have not been informed.

Another problematic issue in this is that while these data are being collected, the researcher is not intentionally collecting data which will later prove to be critical in an investigation. Therefore, he/she does not feel obligated to seek permission regarding access to the data or in any way alerting the actors of the potential use of these data. Also, the usual practice is that the researcher does not record these data during the time they are being collected. The data are usually recorded later "for future reference." The point is that much original and creative research would be impossible without this period or method of unobtrusive data gathering.

Furthering Data Analysis

The second point in which a researcher unobtrusively collects data is when data for an on-going investigation are being analyzed. One of the most critical and frustrating stages in field studies is when explanations are being sought and when data are being organized in some manner to "make sense." The more advanced the analysis, the more critical the unobtrusively collected data may become. This unobtrusive data collection may take two forms. One, the data may be collected in an unspecified manner, setting or circumstance connected with the on-going investigation. For example, researchers usually have access to "relevant" documents for a particular research project. Nearing the close of the research data collection phase, a document may appear

which for unknown reasons remained uncovered. The document, it is found, serves to clarify important aspects in the analysis. The document, also, is not specifically part of the data pool, either because it originated in a different section of the organization, in another organization or its existence was unknown to those who granted access to the research project. In any case, the use of the document is problematic. Its usefulness is enhanced due to what it can contribute to the analysis of the data. However, public notice of that information is necessary.

There are several practical considerations in a situation such as the one cited above. First, the timing in notifying possession of the data may be inappropriate. Second, a selection must be made of those who need to be notified regarding the data. Finally, approval that that data be formally released must be sought. The complications increase as these data are classified. The researcher's role is further complicated when the data are not released. The researcher could provide an analysis based on comprehensive information, but may be forced to limit the analysis to the data released or may be forced to discard a total area of data analysis due to the complicated conditions under which the data were collected. In organizations, this is very serious because the data contents and careers may be inextricable. The political implications are equally serious. Scientifically, the knowledge base is constrained, restrained, and possibly distorted until access to these data are granted. There is something else, the researcher does know the content of the data, however, he/she cannot use it in the analysis or report on it during the period of the conduct of the on-going investigation. He/she may be further constrained to ever use the data. In brief, these matters pose dilemmas for the researcher in the collection and

reporting of data in field studies.

Second, the data may be collected accidentally in some manner not connected with the on-going investigation. These data originate outside the organization or site in which the investigation is taking place. For example, the researcher may have drawn inconclusive findings due to contradictory or incomplete data. Based on the data available, the analysis has taken a certain turn. The emergence of "new" data requires the analysis be redirected or refined. For example, in conceptualizing line positions as those "central" to the organization, it was necessary to collect data which indicated that those intent on attaining the superintendency had some idea regarding the potency of these positions. None of the interview data revealed this understanding. During an AASA convention, however, the researcher witnessed a conversation between superintendents as they advised superintendency aspirants to take "those positions which contain superintendent in the title." They further admonished the aspirants to "stay away from those positions whose titles are ambiguous and changing." These data served to show that superintendents did realize that certain positions were "critical" or "central" to the acquisition of the superintendency. This information subsequently served as the basis for direct questions in follow-up interviews which clarified the administrators' understanding of those positions with advancement potency.

The ethical considerations in this instance are those concerning the degree to which you inform persons that you're using their data to advance your study. An associated consideration is regarding the manner in which you report these data. Do the informants become part of your subject pool?

Does the circumstance become part of the data pool? In any case, the researcher has a problem because the analysis and the report have been affected by the "new" data. The ethical part of it is the manner by which the researcher accounts for the data.

Conducting Research

The third point in which data are collected unobtrusively is during the conduct of the research project. This is the most common area discussed and most researchers tend to consider this as the time in which data are most often collected unobtrusively. There is also a major distinction between this phase and the two mentioned above. Most research subjects are overtly alerted to the fact that data will be collected unobtrusively and some common examples are cited. In other words, formal permission to gather data in an unobtrusive manner is sought prior to the conduct of the research. In practice, subjects are inclined to believe that these data will be collected without personal or professional infringements. A description of this agreement is usually stated in terms of "trust" between the researcher and the subjects.

Normally, unobtrusive refers to having the researcher "fade into the background." In this instance the researcher's role is defined. That is, data are collected by someone who does not interfere in the daily routine of the system. Subjects go about their work, interact with each other, and display their sentiments while the researcher merely records. Complications arise to the extent that the non-participation of the researcher becomes obtrusive. Therefore, the researcher's role is expected to fluctuate between participation and non-participation in light of the obtrusiveness that it might create. For example, researchers vigorously recording executive meeting

notes may be extremely obtrusive, whereas attending a school picnic may necessitate some play in order to remain unobtrusive.

Another aspect to the role which the researcher plays is related to his/her sharing of the data being collected. Unobtrusive normally means that the researcher does not share data with the subjects while the study is under way. Instead, the subjects wait until the researcher has prepared a report for them. The obtrusiveness increases as the researcher shares the data with a growing number of organizational subjects. Conversely, it also increases if the researcher is non-communicative. The researcher is expected to be an important part of the group while he/she is there, and the obtrusiveness increases to the degree that the researcher cannot blend into the group.

Another aspect to the role which is expected of the researcher is that they don't have access to everything within the institution. For example, there are instances of sensitivity, occasions of reprimand or circumstances which are highly confidential. The obtrusiveness of the researcher increases as the researcher insists on recording these events. The unobtrusiveness increases as the researcher willingly withdraws from recording and reporting such activities. The obtrusiveness increases to the extent that the organization requires formal means to bar the researcher from the situation. Therefore, again the role of the researcher is expected to be that of a temporary visitor who may be spared the most severe aspects of the organization.

As can been seen from the examples presented above, the ethical considerations arise from different assumptions than those presented in the first two sections of this report. The ethics arise in terms of the rights and

responsibilities this person has to the group who has admitted him as a temporary member. The researcher is expected to behave within and with respect of the norms of the social system. He/she is expected to be friendly and cooperative, but not share the contents of the information being gathered. The researcher is also expected to withdraw from those events or circumstances of the organization which are severe, sensitive or damaging. The fundamental basis for the ethical norm lies in the temporary group membership.

For the researcher, the fundamental basis for an ethical norm is the search for scientific knowledge. Conflict will arise in those instances when these two assumptions clash in the collection of particular data. These occasions arise when the researcher is collecting data which appear incongruent or incomplete. For example, the researcher may suspect informal group influences in several areas. He/she may also suspect that the subjects are more inclined to influence each other in certain informal settings outside the school. The suspicion may be that an underlying norm exists which inhibits teachers from applying pressure to each other except on very rare occasions and when they are not likely to be observed. This being the case, the researcher may elect to eavesdrop on a teachers' Friday afternoon bar visit. The researcher collects the data without informing his subjects.

The contradictions between the assumptions the researcher and his subjects hold create ethical dilemmas. The scientist wishes to uncover informal influences under natural conditions, therefore, unknown to the subjects, he records their behavior and interaction. He consciously believes he is forwarding science. His subjects, on the other hand, feel they have a right to know when their behavior and interaction is being

observed and recorded. They view the researcher's act as illegitimate, therefore, invalidating his work. What is revealed in this process is that ethic are actualized at two different times. The first is when the data are being collected unknown to the subjects. The second is when the findings based on these data are reported. Do you report that some data were collected without your subjects' awareness?

Conclusions

Is unobtrusive ethical? This report has sought to specify those circumstances in which data are collected unobtrusively. In the conduct of research, there are three points in which data are collected unobtrusively. The first is when there is a "search" for an area of study. Prior permission for the collection and reporting of these data is not sought. Researchers may not feel obligated to report that the research report is utilizing data collected unobtrusively at this stage. Also, the data are not likely to be recorded during the collection period. Instead, it is recalled later as the origin of a study. The ethics at this juncture involve seeking permission to report the data and/or indicating that data were collected without prior arrangements.

The second point in which data may be gathered unobtrusively is when the researcher is attempting to further the analysis. Data not formally made available to the scientist may be uncovered. The ethical problems arise in those instances in which the data alter the analysis. The complications increase if the data are classified or exclusive. The researcher's dilemma is compounded to the degree that the analysis is constrained, restrained or distorted due to the inability to utilize the data discovered

unobtrusively. Others are affected to the degree that the investigation is reported in a limited fashion.

The third point in which the unobtrusive data collection process takes place is when researchers formally gain permission to conduct their study in such a manner as to include gathering information in an unobtrusive way. The subjects normally interpret this to mean that the scientist will record observations and behaviors without interfering. It is also expected that the researcher will blend in with the group and will adapt the data gathering techniques to the various situations. Ethical conflict arises when the researcher does not adhere to these expectations. The two aspects to consider are: 1) the subjects are aware data are being collected and 2) the data that are reported was collected with the subjects' approval.

Ethical standards are maintained when the researcher provides subjects information regarding the probable circumstances under which data may be collected without obtaining prior approval. The researcher also informs the subjects that data collected unobtrusively are used as part of the data pool in the writing of the report. Finally, the researcher determines the consequences of utilizing unobtrusively collected data.

Ethical standards are also maintained when both the researcher and those who granted access to the subjects and site realize that there are ambiguous circumstances in which both parties have to agree on the utility of the release of certain data including that obtained unobtrusively. Importantly too, these agreements are between consenting adults who are ultimately responsible to their respective constituencies. Researchers must justify the validity and comprehensiveness of their data. Those who have granted

permission to have a study conducted in their premises must account to their workers for the release of data and the related findings which are reported. A firm establishment of a working relationship with these understandings improves the likelihood that ethical problems will not arise.